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HANNIBAL'S PASS OVER THE ALPS

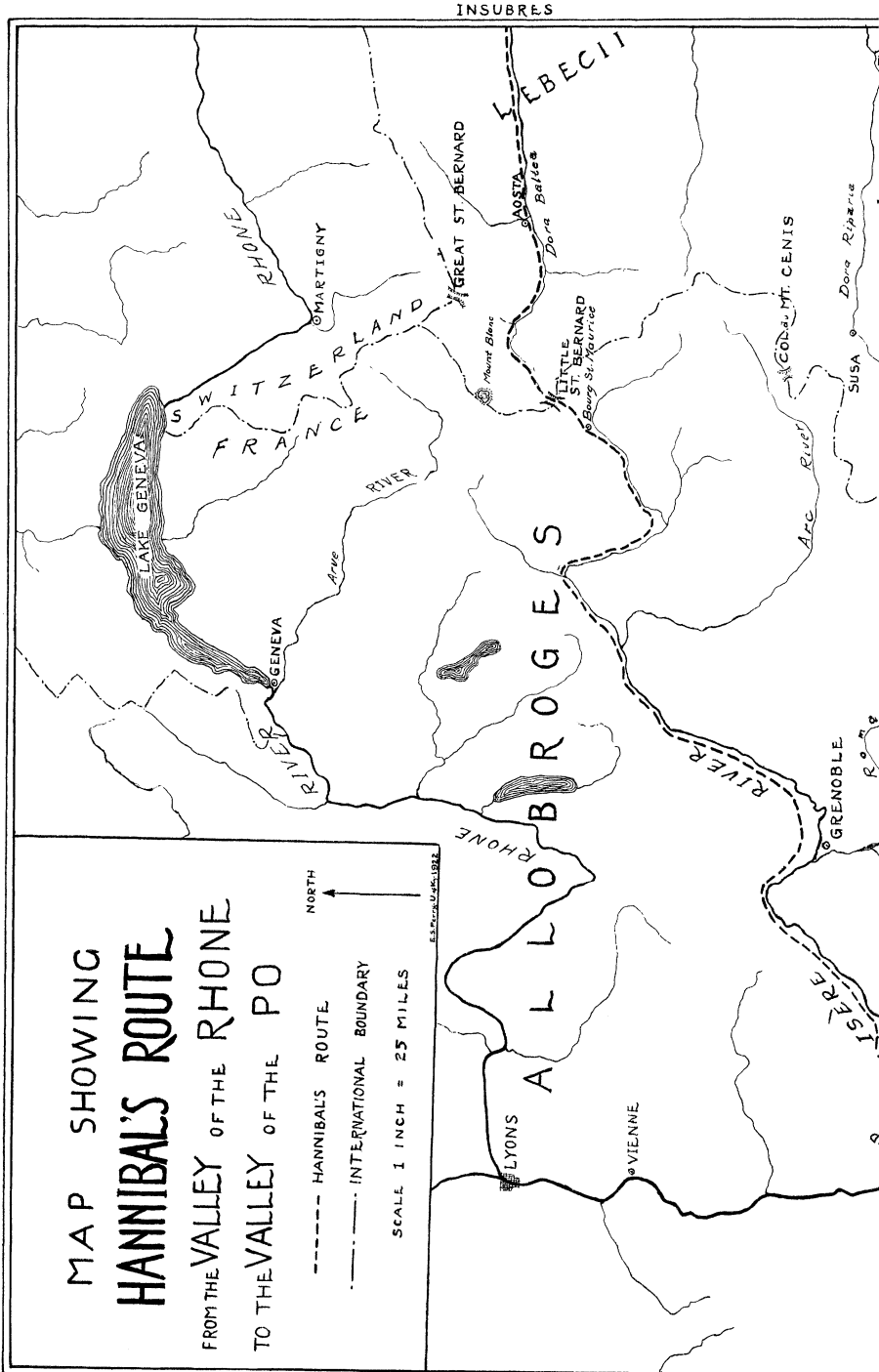
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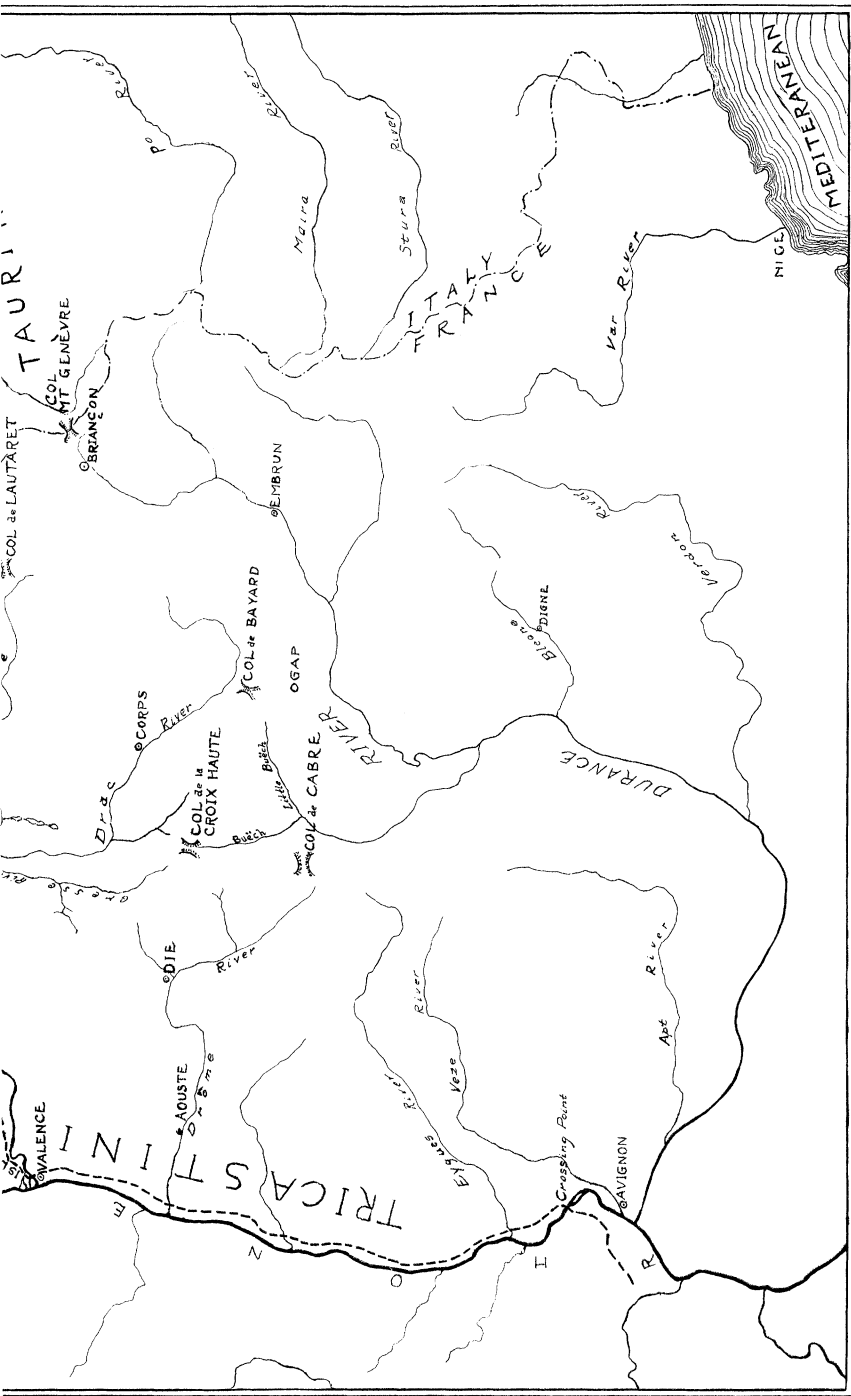
Polybius was a Greek of the noblest lineage and highest culture, with a large experience from an early age in affairs of state. He was born while Hannibal was still in Italy and is, therefore, almost contemporary with the events he describes. He lived many years in Rome on intimate terms with the greatest Romans of his time. He had rare opportunities for historical investigation and made good use of them. He is the antithesis of Livy, is no stylist, indifferent to rhetorical effect or dramatic presentation, but is vastly superior to him in all the essentials of an historian—carefulness in ascertaining his facts and fidelity to truth and consistency in narrating them. It is generally admitted that he had a passion for truth. "Impartial and endowed with a true historical spirit, Polybius came nearer to being a historian in the modern sense than any ancient writer, not even excepting Thucydides. He treats fully of the Hannibalic war, and is our best authority for its characters and events" (Greenough and Peck's Livy). "If the two historians really are at issue, there is little doubt whose authority should stand the higher" (Capes's Livy). Of all the sources, now lost, to which Livy may have had access, there is not one equal in authority to Polybius. He made use of original documents and the monuments when available, was a great traveler, and visited the scenes of the events he describes. Speaking of this very expedition of Hannibal, he says: "I speak with confidence on these points, because I have questioned persons actually engaged on the facts; and have inspected the country, and have gone over the Alpine pass myself, in order to inform myself of the truth and see with my own eyes." (Ch. 48.) This makes Polybius a first-hand witness, and removes all doubt as to the correctness of his own knowledge concerning Hannibal's pass. The only question that remains is, does he describe it with suffi-

MAP SHOWING **HANNIBAL'S ROUTE** FROM THE VALLEY OF THE RHONE TO THE VALLEY OF THE PO

----- HANNIBAL'S ROUTE
 - - - - - INTERNATIONAL BOUNDARY
 SCALE 1 INCH = 25 MILES
 NORTH



INSUBRES



cient definiteness to enable us to follow him intelligently? It is my purpose to prove that he fulfils this grand desideratum and that the pass is the Little St. Bernard.

Having thus established Polybius as a first-rate authority, I shall now proceed to show that he is also consistent and intelligible.

POLYBIUS'S ACCOUNT

We have seen in my former article that Polybius and Livy agree in bringing Hannibal up to the so-called Island formed by the confluence of the Rhone and Isère rivers. They also agree in their story of the part taken by Hannibal in the dispute about the sovereignty between two brothers in this district. The comparison made by Polybius between the Island and the Delta of the Nile has been thought by some to indicate the vividness of an eyewitness. With Hannibal placed at the mouth of the Isère, the first question, it seems to me, to be determined is his objective. When we are inquiring the way to a place, the first thing to state is where we wish to go. This point in the case of Hannibal is settled for us by the unimpeachable testimony of Polybius, for he states that Hannibal on descending from the Alps marched into the territory of the Insubres (56). Since I consider this statement as crucial and going to the root of the whole matter and absolutely incompatible with the Mont Genève route and Hannibal's arrival first among the Taurini; and since Polybius's bare statement does not seem heretofore to have been sufficient to settle the point, I shall now proceed to corroborate his statement by a series of arguments which I think will be found unanswerable.

First of all, the first place at which we can definitely and beyond all dispute locate Hannibal is the Ticinus river. But this river is one of the northern tributaries of the main stream of the Po, and flows right through the territory of the Insubres. This, therefore, confirms Polybius.

Secondly, it is difficult to explain the encounter of the Roman and Carthaginian armies on the Ticinus if Hannibal crossed by the Mont Genève. This pass lies nearly a hundred miles to

the southwest of the Ticinus. We know from both Polybius and Livy (if I may be allowed to quote Livy except to refute him) that Scipio, after Hannibal gave him the slip at the Rhone, hastened to Italy to meet him at the foot of the Alps. Granting that Scipio lost all trace of Hannibal from the Rhone to his arrival in Italy, it was of the highest importance to locate him as soon as he reached that country. We must give Scipio credit for the exercise of ordinary prudence. Only a few passes were available to Hannibal, and these were well known to the Romans. Scipio must have had his scouts out to give him the earliest possible information of Hannibal's movements in Italy. There was ample time for this, as our authors agree that Hannibal went into camp for some time at the foot of the Alps to recuperate his men from the arduous toils of the journey. If he had crossed by the Mont Genève, Scipio would naturally have met him somewhere between that pass and Turin, and in taking his army across the Po and up the Ticinus would have been marching away from Hannibal and not in the direction to meet him. The undisputed fact is that he first met Hannibal on the Ticinus among the Insubres, where Polybius says he was. This is a natural place for the encounter if Hannibal crossed the Alps by the Little St. Bernard, but an improbable place for the Mont Genève.

My third argument does not admit of such brief treatment, but its importance justifies greater length, for I believe it proves conclusively that Hannibal's destination was the country of the Insubres. There are two things on which Polybius lays great stress throughout his narrative of these events: one is the prudence and foresight of Hannibal, the other the habitual and hereditary hostility of these tribes of the Po to the Romans. In fact, he makes the whole plan of Hannibal's campaign turn on this hostility, and gives this as a reason for having devoted so much space in the second book to these Gallic wars, which he summarizes "from the beginning to the arrival of Hannibal." Throughout this narrative the name of the Insubres repeatedly occurs, and always to the forefront in the struggle with Rome. They were in a state of actual war with Rome at the time of Hannibal's inva-

sion (40). Let Polybius speak (34): "He (Hannibal) had thoroughly acquainted himself with the fertility and populousness of the districts at the foot of the Alps and in the valley of the Po, as well as with the warlike courage of the men; *but most important of all, with their hostile feelings to Rome* derived from the previous war, which I described in my last book, *with the express purpose of enabling my readers to follow my narrative.*"

Polybius tells us in this same chapter (34) that when Hannibal had completed his arrangements in the spring for the safety of Spain, "he yet waited for the messengers whom he expected to arrive from the Celts." And further on: "when his messengers returned with a report that the Celts were ready to help him and were all eagerness for his approach; and that the passage of the Alps, though laborious and difficult, was not, however, impossible, he collected his forces from their winter quarters." These passages show conclusively that Hannibal left nothing to chance, that he knew before he broke camp in Spain both his route and destination. Not only did Hannibal have with him in Spain men who knew the whole route—his messengers from the Celts—but he was met at the crossing of the Rhone by chiefs from the Gallic tribes of the Po, who were a source of great encouragement to the army from "the confidence they inspired by their promise of guiding them by a route where they would be abundantly supplied with necessities, and which would lead them with speed and safety into Italy" (44). There can be no doubt that these chiefs came from the tribes in revolt against Rome and that they came to conduct Hannibal into their country to assist them in the war. The Insubres were the most powerful of these tribes and the leaders of the rebellion. It is for this reason that Polybius omits the name of the Lebecii, through whose territory Hannibal had to pass to reach the Insubres, for that he was well aware of the location of this tribe is proved by his mention of them in 2,17 as living next to the Insubres, but higher up towards the sources of the Po.

I consider that the above proves conclusively that Hannibal's destination was the tribes of the Po at war with the Romans and that, since the Insubres were the most prominent of these tribes,

Polybius was justified in naming them as Hannibal's objective, into whose territory he first marched.

I have been at great pains to establish this point and to confirm Polybius's direct statement by circumstantial evidence of an incontrovertible character, for I think it furnishes the key to the whole question and is incompatible with the Mont Genève route.

Let us now examine its bearing on Livy's statement that Hannibal came first into the land of the Taurini—that point on which Livy says all agree. It will be seen at once that the statements of the two authors are inconsistent. As Livy shows no knowledge of Hannibal's foresight and prudence in ascertaining his route and the resources of the country through which he was to march, so he is equally unaware of the friendly relations established by Hannibal with the tribes of the Po and the importance attached to them by Polybius. Polybius and Livy agree that the Taurini were at war with the Insubres and hostile to Hannibal. Polybius's account is perfectly natural and consistent. Hannibal arrives among his friends the Insubres, he finds them at war with the Taurini, he offers the latter terms of alliance and friendship, but they, "distrusting the Carthaginians," reject them; Hannibal then joins the Insubres in war against the common enemy (60). The question might be asked, why did the Taurini distrust Hannibal? Naturally, he had arrived among their enemies, the Insubres, and been received as a friend and ally. Livy, on the other hand, in his ignorance of Hannibal's relations to the Padic Gauls, represents it as a piece of sheer good luck (21,39) that Hannibal found the Taurini at war with the Insubres; otherwise they might have attacked and destroyed his army in its weakened condition from the recent hardships. How could Hannibal under such circumstances, when he reached the top of the pass, have encouraged his troops by "pointing to the plains of the Po, and reminding them of the friendly welcome which awaited them from the Gauls who lived there" (54). This passage proves conclusively that Polybius could not have had in mind any pass which, as the Mont Genève, would have led Hannibal into the midst of his enemies. It also proves that this whole Taurini

theory, instead of being a requisite for Hannibal's pass, is an insuperable objection. Moreover it is certain that the Taurini were not among those tribes who sent deputies to meet Hannibal at the Rhone and conduct him to their country. These guides must have come from the friendly tribes, and it was to these that Hannibal pointed from the top of the pass, and not the Taurini.

Let us now turn to the more particular description of Hannibal's route as given by Polybius. The first thing we are struck with is his sparing use of proper names as a means of designation. But this is in keeping with his plan, for he tells us in 36: "My opinion is that in the case of well known places, the mention of names is of great assistance, but that in the case of unknown countries, names are no better than unintelligible and unmeaning sounds." This absence of names to guide us is the reason why I considered it so important to fix Hannibal's goal. With the army at the mouth of the Isère, the destination the Insubres, a map becomes the best evidence for the route and leaves only one to be seriously considered, that is, for a person subject to the ordinary rules of behavior—to accomplish a purpose by the easiest and most available means, or at least to avoid much unnecessary trouble.

Polybius tells us (39) that after crossing the Rhone they "marched along the river itself (*παρ' αὐτὸν τὸν ποταμὸν*) in the general direction of its sources as far as the ascent of the Alps into Italy" (*ἕως πρὸς τὴν ἀναβολὴν τῶν Ἀλπεων τὴν εἰς Ἰταλίαν*); and again, after describing Hannibal's activities on the Island, he says (49): "marching along the river (*πορευθεὶς παρὰ τὸν ποταμὸν*) for 800 stades in ten days Hannibal began the ascent of the Alps facing him" (50). The point of these two quotations to which I invite special attention is, first, that the entire march from the mouth of the Isère to the pass leading into Italy is along the river, or at least *a* river; secondly, that only one pass is mentioned. Hannibal's route must meet these two conditions. The Mont Genève route fails on both counts. We have seen above that it is impossible to move an army from the mouth of the Isère to the Mont Genève without leaving the river and passing over to another watershed by passes varying in height from a little under 4,000 ft.

to nearly 9,000 ft. It would certainly be subjecting the text of Polybius to a great strain to call this, "marching along the river up to the ascent of the Alps," meaning by the latter the main pass into Italy.

I shall now mention another requirement which definitely fixes Hannibal's route and is wanting in the Mont Genève. Polybius makes it perfectly clear that the whole march from the mouth of the Isère right up to and including the ascent of the Alps was through the territory of the Allobroges. At the end of chapter 49 he tells us that "the Carthaginians were greatly alarmed at the prospect of marching through the territory of the Allobroges." In chapter 50 we are told that "as long as the Carthaginians were in the plains, the various chiefs of the Allobroges refrained from attacking them," but when "Hannibal began to enter the mountainous region, the chiefs of the Allobroges collected large numbers of their tribe and occupied the points of vantage in advance, on the route by which Hannibal's troops were constrained to make their ascent." Also farther on the Allobroges are named (51). All these passages prove conclusively that Hannibal's route from the mouth of the Isère to the passage of the Alps was along a river and through the Allobroges. This fixes the route and shows that it must have lain up the Isère and over the Little St. Bernard. No other route will meet these requirements. This question of the Allobroges is a great stumbling block to the advocates of the Mont Genève. The only way they can meet it is to assume that in Hannibal's time the Allobroges were not confined to the region of the Isère and Rhone valleys, but may have extended over as far as the Mont Genève. There is not a particle of evidence to support such an assumption. Anything can be proved if we are allowed to make the necessary assumptions. We do not construct theories on what we do not know, but on what we do know.

The Great St. Bernard remains to be briefly discussed. Its only merit is that it leads into the Insubres. Everything else is against it. First may be mentioned its great distance without any compensating advantages. It is 312 miles by the Rhone from the Island to Aosta ("the plains of the Po"), while by the

Isère route it is only 190 miles. The latter corresponds almost exactly with the distance given by Polybius—800 stades along the river to the pass, 1200 (39) from there to the plains of the Po (reckoning 9 stades to the mile). The 800 stades (90 miles) up the Rhone would fall short of Lake Geneva by 100 miles. Then it hardly seems credible that such a striking feature on the march as Lake Geneva, 45 miles long, would not have been mentioned by Polybius, who is supposed to have gone over the route. Besides, this route fails to meet the requisite of lying wholly within the territory of the Allobroges. Nobody will maintain that this tribe ever occupied the Rhone valley as high up as the Great St. Bernard. It was inhabited by tribes with the general name of Semi-Germani. But there are stronger objections of an *a priori* nature. It would be too unreasonable to suppose that the guides who came from the Insubres to meet Hannibal at the Rhone would have chosen this longer route through remote regions and tribes alien in race rather than the easy and direct route by the Isère reached by a much lower pass. The Little St. Bernard is considered a low and easy pass (7179 ft.) and is nearly 1000 ft. lower than the Great St. Bernard (8111 ft.). Over it the Gauls had streamed for centuries into Italy. These guides would naturally have led Hannibal back by the pass with which they were best acquainted and over the route they had so recently traveled, of whose resources for supporting an army they possessed fresh first-hand knowledge. This is certainly the way in which Aristotle's "man of ordinary prudence" would act.

Just a word about the Mont Cenis route. By leading up the Isère and Arc rivers, it fulfils the requirement of marching along a river, but there is no evidence that the Allobroges ever extended as far south as the foot of this pass; and a still graver objection is that the descent into Italy joins the Mont Genève route and, therefore, involves the difficulty of leading into the Taurini instead of the Insubres. Moreover, this pass is not mentioned by a single ancient author, and there is no evidence that it was known or used before the 8th century A.D. But the strongest reason against it is that it involves a useless and senseless detour from the plain and straight path to Hannibal's objective. The

same criticism applies to every other pass than the Little St. Bernard.

I must now mention in conclusion a few minor difficulties which I think will not be found to affect the integrity of the above arguments or the consistency of Polybius. We are told (50) that Hannibal marched along the river for 800 stades, or 90 miles, to where he began the ascent of the Alps. "The pass itself was about 1200 stades (130 miles) which being crossed would bring him into the plains of the Po in Italy" (39). We have seen that this distance of 2000 stades, or 220 miles, is fairly accurate for the whole distance from the mouth of the Isère to Aosta, the actual distance being 190 miles. Allowance must be made for the lack of definiteness in the phrase "plains of the Po." There was no Aosta in Hannibal's time. Now the actual distance from the mouth of the Isère to Bourg St. Maurice at the foot of the Little St. Bernard is 150 miles, and from there to Aosta only 40 miles. It will thus be seen that the 90 miles march along the river falls far short of the actual pass, and the 130 miles of the pass are far in excess of the actual 40 miles over the pass to Aosta. Bearing in mind that the whole distance is correct, it becomes a mere question of names. Polybius's conception of the pass, or "ascent of the Alps," was not the Little St. Bernard alone, but he reckoned it as beginning where Hannibal first encountered the mountainous region in the modern Tarantaise, and he included in his estimate also the descent into the plains of the Po.

This is a simple, consistent, and intelligible explanation, and agrees perfectly with the fact that nine days (53) were consumed from the beginning of the ascent to the head of the pass. The time given for the whole distance of 200 miles from the mouth of the Isère is reasonable under the conditions, ten days along the river (50) and "the actual passage of the Alps fifteen days" (56). It should be remembered that all distances beyond the Rhone are only estimates, and their accuracy is highly creditable to the good sense of Polybius. No other route comes anywhere near this correspondence with the distances given by Polybius, and these agree practically with the actual distance.

Next we may note that Polybius's credit as a geographer has been severely impugned from his statement that "the Rhone rises to the northwest of the Adriatic on the northern slopes of the Alps, and flowing westward, eventually discharges itself into the Sardinian Sea" (47). I respectfully submit that, as a broad general statement, Polybius is correct. The mouth of the Rhone is nearly 300 miles west of its source, and the rest of the statement is sufficiently accurate. On like grounds Polybius has been criticised for stating (47) that Hannibal after crossing the Rhone "marched up the river bank from the sea in an easterly direction." The criticism is trivial. Hannibal did march north for four days, but Polybius speaking broadly ignored this small fraction of the march. Here again the terminus was 200 miles east of the starting point, and Polybius is not only justified, but the statement seems, when taken in connection with the passage which I quote below, to point strongly to the Isère route. He describes the Alps as extending from Marseilles to the head of the Adriatic and separating the valley of the Rhone from that of the Po. "It was these mountains that Hannibal now crossed *from the Rhone valley* into Italy" (47). These passages occur in the narrative just after the crossing of the Rhone, and would seem to imply that Polybius at the moment contemplated Hannibal as about to leave the Rhone valley proper.

Polybius is silent as to Hannibal's crossing the Isère. He probably did cross it, as the marching would have been much better on the north bank, and he would have had to take over a part of his army at least to settle the quarrel between the two brothers on the Island. Strictly speaking, it would be necessary in order to make the journey conform to the requisite of marching in the territory of the Allobroges, as this tribe occupied the country lying between the Rhone and Isère rivers.

The sum and substance of this article is that I have proved that Livy, writing two hundred years after the events, is a poor authority, that his account is confused and contradictory; that Polybius is a first-rate authority, he had talked with persons who took part in the events and had himself been over the pass;

that every word in his narrative is consistent with his statement that Hannibal arrived first among the Insubres; that this is incompatible with Livy's Durance-Mont-Genèvre-Taurini route; that the route up the Isère and over the Little St. Bernard fulfils every requisite for Hannibal's pass according to Polybius; that every other pass fails in some important particulars; that not a single reason can be adduced to show why Hannibal should have chosen a circuitous and more difficult route instead of the plain, straight, natural route up the broad, open, fertile valley of the Isère; that we must credit Hannibal with acting as a man of ordinary prudence and seeking his objective by the shortest and easiest way.